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ABSTRACT

Symbol shelves are tools for developing two-way communication with multihandicapped children who can anticipate events, but who do not respond to speech or sign language. The purpose of symbol shelves is to allow children to be expressive through symbols, to enable them to feel some sense of control, and to serve as a bridge to a more formal method of communication. There are five steps involved in setting up a symbol shelf. The teacher should: (1) creatively find out what activities the child enjoys; (2) fit these activities into a classroom routine; (3) select obvious objects to serve as symbols for these activities; (4) place the objects in sequence on a shelf; and (5) have a box where the child can put each object after the activity is over. A large part of this document is a detailed scenario offered as an example of how a teacher might set up and use a symbol shelf as part of a child's daily routine. (DC)

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THE USE OF "SYMBOL SHELVES" IN TEACHING COMMUNICATION WITH MULTI-HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

Multi-handicapped children often have no usable communication system other than crying, smiling, hitting, biting, etc. Teachers who are used to traditional forms of communication using speech or speech and sign language are often frustrated in finding a way to "get through" to a nonresponsive multi-handicapped child.

The focus of this discussion is on children who are ambulatory or at least have some form of independent locomotion, have some form of grasp, those who have no or very little speech, those who have shown even some minute amount of anticipation of any event; for example, at home child goes to a place and waits where a pleasurable event routinely occurs or where favorite objects or food are kept.

I have seen many classrooms for the severely and profoundly handicapped look like this: there is a general routine to the day which the teachers follows: for example, receiving child off the bus, going to physical therapy, going to lunch, outdoor time, sensory stim time, etc. and finally a time to load on the bus. During the activity times the teachers or aides present various objects and do various exercises with the child. The main element that is missing in this scene is real communication. This child is put through the motions of the day by the adult in a way such that communication is one-way - - - from teacher to child, not between teacher and child. Certainly when the child cries and pitches a fit, that is telling adult "I don't want this anymore", but where is the dialogue? Communication is a two-way street. What does the child have to communicate about?

Stop to ask yourself: "What is it that the child really enjoys doing?" I have seen some children that don't seem to enjoy anything. However, you have to be creative in finding out what they enjoy other than self stimulation, of course. The second step is to use what the child enjoys to build a dialogue.

In my experience I have found some of the following things to elicit pleasurable responses from low functioning, multi-handicapped children: bouncing on the trampoline with the child, going outside and swinging, or being indoors and swinging on a hammock, being pulled in a wagon, or being rocked on a vestibular board, playing with a vibrator, or being rolled around prone on a scooter board, being tickled by the teacher, or wrestling with the teacher, things like eating favorite foods and/or drinking favorite juices. Sometimes the child

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favors some particular tactile type of stimulation like playing with sticks or macaroni noodles. So, check into many different things that you think the child is going to enjoy.

The Purpose of the Symbol Shelf:

1. To develop a two-way communication in which the child can be expressive symbolically even though he does not have speech.
2. To enable the child to feel some sense of control over his or her environment.
3. To serve as a possible bridge to a more formal communication system, either speech and/or sign language, or some form of total communication using speech and sign, or using a pictorial system of communication.

How to Set Up the Symbol Shelf:

1. Find out what the child enjoys and be creative in your experimentation.
2. Fit all of these enjoyable things into a classroom routine.
3. Select obvious objects as "symbols" that can be used in the activities themselves. This is an important point. You want to build an association in the child's mind between the object and the event itself so that you are building in anticipation within this routine. Anticipation is a very basic element of communication skills.
4. Place the chosen objects being used as symbols in a sequence on a shelf that the child can reach. Lay them out from left to right in order of the day's events.
5. Have a box with a lid next to the shelves which we will call the "finished" box where the child puts objects away after each event is over.

An Example Scenario:

The creative teacher has experimented and found that Patty enjoys these activities: swinging outside, rolling over a large bolster, bouncing on a trampoline, drinking juice, eating applesauce at lunch and not much else, riding on the bus, playing tickle games with the teacher, playing in a dark room with colored flashlights and internally lit balls, and squeezing balloons.

The teacher structures a daily routine for the child. For example, after Patty gets off the bus, she first goes with the physical therapist to gross motor, or she may have it done there in the classroom. Then there is a fine motor period, then comes juice time, then a short outside time, then lunch, after lunch an interaction time with the teacher involving tickle games, then visual and perceptual skills time, and then it is time to get on the bus and go home.

With this daily routine structure in mind, and also with Patty's favorite activities in mind, the teacher determines which objects she will put on Patty's symbol shelf. Whenever possible she tries to pick objects which are actually used in the activities although occasionally one of the objects must be an arbitrary symbol. Since Patty likes rolling over large bolsters, bouncing on

the trampoline, and being pulled on her scooter board, the teacher lumps these into the gross motor time which is Patty's first major activity of the morning after she gets off the bus. For this segment of Patty's morning, the teacher has chosen a tennis terry cloth wrist band to symbolize gross motor time. This is an example of an arbitrary symbol, but since it will be used consistently every time Patty goes to do gross motor activities either with the therapist, the aide, or with the teacher, she will begin to associate the wrist band with some of her favorite gross motor activities. For the fine motor period the teacher has chosen to use a small balloon that has been blown up just a bit with a little air for Patty to be able to squeeze it. She tapes this to a little cardboard just so that the little balloon won't blow off the shelf when people walk by. However, Patty is easily able to pick it up off the shelf. Although the fine motor period will include handling other types of objects, the teacher plans to always at least start out the period of time with squeezing small balloons, since that is one of Patty's favorite activities. For juice time, the teacher decides to use a small plastic cup which Patty will get off the shelf and carry to the snack table. The outdoor period will be symbolized by wearing a cap of some kind. This can be a baseball cap since it is good for hot weather also. The teacher has chosen a spoon to use as a symbol for lunchtime. The interaction period after lunch, which we will call "tickle games" with the teacher, will be symbolized by a red bandana which the teacher will place around Patty's neck before they begin their interaction. This is another arbitrary symbol, but one which Patty will come to associate with this period during the day. After that comes the visual perceptual skill time in which the teacher has chosen to use a flashlight on the symbol shelf. For going home on the bus the teacher decides she will use a shoulder-strap purse. She is going to ask Patty's mother to have her wear the purse in the morning so that they can take it off and put it on the hook with her coat by the symbol shelf. At the end of the day she will put her coat on and put her purse on---- that will symbolize getting on the bus.

Once the teacher has decided the routine structure for the day, the symbols to accompany Patty's favorite activities, and has it set up and ready to go, this is the way it would look on the first day; the first week; etc.: Patty comes into the room off the bus, the teacher leads her to a hook which is strategically placed next to the symbol shelf; she takes off her little purse; she manipulates Patty through hanging it on the hook and manipulates her through hanging her coat on the hook. When it is time for Patty to have her gross motor therapy, the teacher, or it could be the therapist, leads Patty by the hand to the symbol shelf. She places Patty's hand on the wrist band and helps her to put it on her wrist; then they go immediately to the gross motor area (whether it is in the gym or in the classroom). The teacher makes it a point that Patty does her <u>favorite</u> gross motor activities each day in addition to the <u>new</u> things that she will be working on with the therapist. It is very important when using the symbol shelf (I can't emphasize it enough) that the child has to enjoy the things that are used in the events of the day. Otherwise, the symbol shelf will <u>not</u> work because the child will not develop the association between the object and the event. When the gross motor period is over the therapist brings her back and together they take her wrist band off. The therapist manipulates her through putting it into the finished box and says something like "play time is finished" and they put it in the box together.

Next it is fine motor time. The teacher takes Patty and together they go to the symbol shelf. She places Patty's hand on the partially inflated balloon, and Patty carries it to the area where they do fine motor (such as to her corner chair and floor table). She brings out more little balloons for Patty to play with to introduce the fine motor time. Then they do whatever else is on the schedule for fine motor. After that period is over the teacher takes Patty back to the symbol shelf where the finished box is. They lift the lid of the box, put the balloon in, and talk about "the balloons are finished".

The next activity in the routine of the day is juice time. The same thing happens here. The teacher manipulates Patty through getting her cup off the shelf, and using the cup to drink the juice. After juice is over they put the cup in the finished box together. During each of these initial introductions to the symbol shelf, the teacher always talks (or talks and signs) to the child in short sentences, talking about the object, what they are going to be doing; a lot of language can be built around these objects themselves.

After juice time it is time to go outside. Teacher and Patty go together to get the baseball cap off the shelf. She puts the cap on Patty and then immediately they go outside to go swinging. After that time is over they come back in, bring the cap and put it in the finished box together.

Next is lunchtime. Patty is taken to the symbol shelf, they get the spoon off the shelf together. (Also, some teachers find that using a bib to symbolize lunchtime is easier than using a spoon if the child is going to be dropping a spoon all the way down the hall.) They get the spoon, carry it to the lunchroom or wherever they eat, bring the spoon back after lunch and put it in the finished box.

The next activity on the schedule is the interaction time or tickle games with the teacher. They go to the symbol shelf, the teacher helps Patty pick up the bandana, teacher puts it around Patty's neck, they talk about what's going to happen, and they go immediately to the mat on the floor where they routinely do this activity. When it is over they take the bandana to the finished box. Same thing with the visual perceptual skill time during the day; she helps Patty get the flashlight and they take it into the closet. Patty plays with the flashlight initially. Then they will do the other perceptual skills that they do during that time, come back to the room, and place the flashlight into the finished box.

The last activity is going home on the bus, so Patty is taken to her hook where her coat and her purse are hanging, she puts these things on with the teacher's help and waits for the bus to come.

This kind of routine (where the teacher manipulates the child through using the symbol shelf) will have to be done over a period of time; depending on how quickly the child begins to make associations determines how long the teacher will have to continue the manipulation. Some children will take much longer than others. I would say that after six months of doing this every day, if the child has not caught on at all, or is not showing <u>any</u> sign of anticipation in the routine of the day, then it could be discontinued as an appropriate form of communication for the child. What happens in many cases, though, is that children, when they know their favorite activities are coming up, will begin to go to the symbol shelf on their own or at least walk towards it or stand around in the area

expectantly. The teacher must look for the subtle signs of anticipation, such as when Patty spontaneously picks up the balloon; or has a bandana placed around her neck and begins to smile. Maybe she will take the teacher by the hand and lead her to the tickle game area or lead her by the hand to the visual perceptual skill area.

The ultimate function of the symbol shelf is for the child to be expressive symbolically using the objects. Eventually we want to get the child to the point where she will spontaneously go to the shelves and pick out an object. She may just hold the object, or if she brings the object to the teacher or to the adult, that's even better. At this point when a child is showing this kind of anticipation and initiative, the teacher must at first respond to whatever the child brings, even though it may be out of order. For example, if Patty, when she comes in the morning, goes directly to the symbol shelf and grabs her flashlight (even though that does not come until the afternoon) the teacher needs to go ahead and do that activity with Patty. This way Patty is learning that she does have some control over her environment; that she can have a two-way dialogue with the teacher. So, what is happening here is that the teacher must, at least for a while, become "the slave" of the child when she is using the symbol shelf. Later the teacher can build in some kind of sign for Patty to know that she has to wait for this activity; maybe a sign for "later", because it would obviously be inconvenient to always do the activities at Patty's whim. But at first the teacher is going to have to do it that way.

At the end of the successful use of the symbol shelf, we have a child that has learned to anticipate the events of the day, has associated hopefully some verbal language with the objects themselves, is becoming more verbal because of this, or is signing more, or is more communicative with adults through gestures. The child is coming to associate adults with these pleasurable experiences and will take the objects to the adult or lead the adults by the hand to let the adult know what he wants. For many children who have no awareness of adults at all, or do not interact with adults at all, this is a gigantic step.

From using the symbol shelf, it is much easier to make a transition to other forms of communication such as spoken language or using pictures instead of objects, or using gestures and sign language. The idea with the symbol shelf is to get that initial idea of what communication is all about to a low functioning, multi-handicapped child. It is one way to break through the barrier of the child's not caring to communicate at all. The reason the system works is twofold: first, the teacher puts into the daily routine the things that the child enjoys doing; and second, it works because there is continuity and consistency in the system. Ultimately, any classroom should have as its context or as its general principle the idea of communication, even at a very low level throughout the day for the multi-handicapped child. The system can also be adapted to home use. If you can imagine your own frustration at having someone else plan your entire day and shove things at you that you may or may not enjoy, this will give you an idea of the frustration that some of these children may feel. The symbol shelf at least gives them the idea that they have some control, that they can communicate what they want, and that communication can be fun.